

9/11 Whistleblowers: Michael Springmann

by [James Corbett](#)

September 9, 2019

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That so many of the 9/11 visas were issued from a single office—the US Consulate in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia—may seem like a minor footnote at first glance, but it is not. In fact, the Jeddah Consulate is not just another US Consular Office. It has a history of issuing visas to terrorists at the request of the CIA. Just ask Michael Springmann. This is his story.

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TRANSCRIPT

In the days after September 11th, 2001, while the toxic dust was still settling on Lower Manhattan, details began to emerge about the terrorists who had allegedly hijacked the fateful 9/11 flights. Names and pictures were released to the public and broadcast around the world. Ziad Jarrah. Hani Hanjour. Marwan al Shehhi. Mohammad Atta. Even before the official story had begun to coalesce, the foreign faces and unfamiliar names flashing across the screens seared themselves into the

consciousness of a traumatized public and left little doubt: This attack was the work of Muslim terrorists.

But at the same time, information began to come out that created problems for this narrative. Reports of these devout Muslim fundamentalists [drinking alcohol and partying in strip clubs](#). Revelations that two of the suspects had been [allowed into the US](#) after being identified as Al Qaeda agents. Confirmation that these same agents [lived with an FBI asset](#) while in the US. And even the testimony of a senior military intelligence official that a counter-terror program had been specifically warned not to investigate Mohammad Atta in the lead up to 9/11.

WYATT ANDREWS: According to Congressman Kurt Weldon, it was a secret Pentagon intelligence unit code named Able Danger that knew a year before 9/11 that lead hijacker Mohammed Atta was in the United States and connected to Al Qaeda.

CONGRESSMAN KURT WELDON: And as you can see, they identified Mohamed Atta's cell.

ANDREWS: In the summer of 2000, he says, the Pentagon's special ops command had identified two terrorist cells inside the US, and knew of the connection between Atta and three other men who became hijackers. When the agents recommended telling the FBI, Weldon says Clinton administration lawyers said "No," because Atta was in the country legally and could not be targeted by military intelligence.

WELDON: And their recommendation to bring the FBI in, to take that cell out, which was ignored, and they were told you can't do that.

ANDREWS: So a year before 9/11 they had their picture—they had the picture of Mohamed Atta—

WELDON: Yes.

ANDREWS: And they knew roughly where he was?

WELDON: Yes.

SOURCE: [Able Danger – CBS, CNN News, August 9, 2005](#)

But of the many bizarre pieces of the alleged 9/11 hijacker puzzle, none gets closer to the heart of the mystery than the seemingly innocuous revelation that 14 of the alleged hijackers' visas to enter the United States had been issued at the same office: the US Consulate in Jeddah. That so many of the visas were issued from a single office may seem like a minor footnote at first glance, but it is not. In fact, the Jeddah Consulate is not just another US Consular Office. It has a history of issuing visas to terrorists at the request of the CIA.

Just ask Michael Springmann.

J. Michael Springmann was a graduate of the Georgetown University School of Foreign Service who joined the Commerce Department's International Trade Administration, serving as an economic/commercial officer in Stuttgart from 1977 to 1980 and as a commercial attache in New Delhi from 1980 to 1982. In 1987, having passed the foreign service exam and gone through an orientation program, Springmann was assigned to the Jeddah consulate in Saudi Arabia.

Whatever he was expecting to find awaiting him in his new office, it's safe to say that it didn't take long for Springmann to find that the reality was going to be very different. As he writes in his expose of his time at the Jeddah consulate, *Visas for Al Qaeda: CIA Handout That Rocked the World*, "the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia was a mysterious and exotic place, but it was nowhere near as exotic and mysterious as the American consulate general on Palestine Road."

J. MICHAEL SPRINGMANN: Well, when I got to Saudi Arabia I

began hearing all kinds of strange things about the problems my predecessor had made for me. I heard this in fact from Walter Cutler, the American ambassador, just before I left. He spent 45 minutes telling me about all the problems that my predecessor Greta Holtz had created, and I thought, "Gee, she's going to make my career for me!"

And I get to Jeddah and I'm being requested: "It's your decision of course, Mike, but we have this problem here with this visa and we have an especially good contact and we'd like to have the person get a visa to come to the United States. Can you do it?" And I'd interview them and I'd give them the visa.

And after a while, these people began to be really strange characters that had no ties to either Saudi Arabia or to their own country and I would refuse them. And I would get a rocket from the Consul General Jay Freres, who's dead now, about "Why didn't you issue the visa? This guy is a good contact."

I said, "Well, he couldn't prove he had any ties either to Saudi Arabia or to his own country that was strong enough to make him return from the United States to Saudi Arabia or to his own country." There's no set list of contacts and connections, but it's things like having a job, having businesses, having property, having family, something that would prevent you from staying in the United States and disappearing into the woodwork.

And it got to the point where it was "Either issue the visa or you're not going to work for the State Department anymore." And as time went by I found out that of some 20 Americans there were only three including myself that I knew for a certainty to work for the Department of State. The rest worked for the CIA or the National Security Agency.

Eventually reassigned as a political/economic officer in

Stuttgart and, finally, as an economic analyst for the State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research, it took years for Springmann to fully comprehend the story that he had found himself in the middle of during his time at the Jeddah Consulate. A key piece of that puzzle was provided when Springmann returned to the US and talked to journalist Joseph Trento, who informed him that the Jeddah office was being used by the CIA to ship in Osama Bin Laden's associates for training in the US.

SPRINGMANN: So I came across Joe Trento, the journalist, in the middle of all of this, and he said, "Well, what you were doing in Saudi Arabia was issuing visas to the Mujahedin who were being recruited for Afghanistan to fight the Soviets." And then the penny dropped and my eyes were opened and I said "Yeah! That explains why they got so ferocious when I said no to these visas and why they stonewalled me when I tried to find out what was going on."

I was talking formally to people. I talked formally to the Bureau of Consular Affairs when I was in Washington on the advice of the council for consular affairs in Riyadh. And then I talked to the Congressional Committee on Foreign Affairs for the House of Representatives. I talked to the the Government Accountability Office, which is a watchdog for Congress on the executive branch and got nowhere. People just didn't want to talk to me. And I said "Well this is really strange."

And it bears out exactly what Trento had said that they had an intelligence operation going on. And according to Joe the reason they didn't tell people in Jeddah about this was they wanted plausible deniability. They wanted to be at arm's length from what people were saying and saying "Well oh, gee. We didn't know anything about that. He made a mistake. He didn't get with the program. He didn't know what was going on. He was violating the law. Put him in jail. Fine him." Whatever.

Although the idea seems outlandish from a post-9/11 perspective, at the time it was not particularly surprising. The CIA had worked with Osama Bin Laden and other so-called “Mujahedin,” including many Saudis who had been drawn to Afghanistan to fight America’s arch-enemy, the Soviets, during the Afghan War. There were [glowing articles](#) framing Bin Laden as an “[Anti-Soviet Warrior](#)” who was “On the Road to Peace” in mainstream publications well into the 1990s. And in the weeks after 9/11 it was even [reported](#) in the pages of *Newsweek* that in the late 1980s—precisely at the time that Springmann was stationed at the Jeddah consulate—“the veterans of the [Mujahedin’s] holy war against the Soviets began arriving in the United States—many with passports arranged by the CIA.”

One infamous example of an intelligence agency helping a known terrorist to enter the United States in this period came in the case of Omar Abdel Rahman, better known as the “Blind Sheik.” In December 1990 it was [revealed](#) that the Blind Sheik had “slipped into the United States” despite being on a State Department terrorist watchlist. At the time, the State Department insisted “[t]hey made a mistake” by issuing him a tourist visa from the United States Embassy in Khartoum. But three years later, the truth finally came out. As *The New York Times* [reported](#) in 1993 after a State Department inspector general investigation: “Central Intelligence Agency officers reviewed all seven applications made by Sheik Omar Abdel Rahman to enter the United States between 1986 and 1990 and only once turned him down because of his connections to terrorism.”

In this context, the revelation that Springmann was being directed by the CIA to let Mujahedin into the US for training was not unthinkable or outlandish conspiracy conjecture. On the contrary, it was practically expected.

As Springmann himself admits, if he had simply been informed at the time that the CIA was helping to facilitate such an operation in support of their foreign policy goals against the

Soviet Union, he probably would have went along with it.

***SPRINGMANN:** And you know it goes back to Trento saying “Well, they wanted somebody—some schlub is his word—to be there and take the heat if something went wrong. And at the time I was dumb enough that if they’d explained it to me, “Yes, we’re recruiting the Mujahedin” I would have said “Well, yeah, OK, this is an important foreign policy goal. I hate those godless communist bastards! So yeah, I’ll go with this.” But they never did.*

And it would have saved a lot of effort on my part and saved a lot of embarrassment on their part, because I’ve been writing and talking about this for the last 25 years.

Springmann’s attitude is reflective of much of the American public’s perception of Muslim terrorists in the late 1980s. As tools of US foreign policy—convenient pawns to be wielded on the global chessboard against America’s enemies—they were not regarded as enemies themselves, but embraced as “freedom fighters” and “anti-Communist warriors.”

***KENNETH BRANAGH:** US National Security Adviser Brzezinski flew to Pakistan to set about rallying resistance. He wanted to arm the Mujahedin without revealing America’s role. On the Afghan border near the Khyber Pass, he urged the Soldiers of God to redouble their efforts.*

***ZBIGNIEW BRZEZINSKI:** We know of their deep belief in God, and we are confident that their struggle will succeed. That land over there is yours. You will go back to it one day, because your fight will prevail and you’ll have your homes and your mosques back again, because your cause is right and God is on your side.*

SOURCE: [Soldiers of God](#)

PRESIDENT RONALD REAGAN: *The goal of the United States*

remains a genuinely independent Afghanistan, free from external interference, an Afghanistan whose people choose the type of government they wish, an Afghanistan to which the four million refugees from Soviet aggression may return in safety and, yes, in honor.

On behalf of the American people, I salute Chairman Khalis, his delegation, and the people of Afghanistan themselves. You are a nation of heroes. God bless you.

SOURCE: [Remarks Following a Meeting With Afghan Resistance Leaders and Members of Congress](#)

But that was before “the day that changed everything.”

After the FBI released [their list](#) of suspected 9/11 hijackers, it didn't take long for questions to emerge about these men, their background, and their travels. What paper trail and travel documents had been left in their wake? How did they obtain their visas to enter the US? Where did they obtain them? When? Which consular officers were in charge of issuing the visas, and were there any irregularities in the process?

It took years for these questions to be answered, but when they were the results were scarcely believable. Not only had 14 of the alleged hijackers' visas been obtained from the same Jeddah consulate that the CIA had used to funnel terrorists to the US during Springmann's tenure, but 12 of those visas were issued by a single consular officer: Shayna Steinger.

A Columbia University graduate with no apparent foreign service background, Steinger was [appointed as a consular officer in 1999](#) and arrived in Jeddah for her first foreign service assignment on July 1, 2000. From that point on, she proceeded to issue the visas to more than half of the alleged hijackers, many of them based on incomplete applications and fraudulent documents.

Saeed al Ghamdi [received two visas](#), one in September, 2000, and the other in June, 2001. His second application was incomplete, lied about his earlier visa and was linked to a different passport with fraudulent features. Both visa requests were approved by Shayna Steinger.

Hani Hanjour [received a visa from Steinger](#) in September, 2000, just two weeks after she rejected his first application. In subsequent investigations, she gave [conflicting accounts](#) of why she denied Hanjour's visa the first time and why she issued it the second time.

Despite numerous errors on their applications which normally would have gotten them rejected, on October 24, 2000, Steinger [issued visas to both Waleed and Wail Alshehri](#).

And, later that week, despite an incomplete application and suspicious indicators in his passport, Steinger [issued a visa to Ahmed Alnami](#).

From the time of her arrival at Jeddah until just weeks before the attacks, the pattern continued: Men with incomplete, error-ridden applications and fraudulent or suspicious documents had their visas rubber stamped by Steinger and, in September, their names and faces ended up on the FBI's hijack suspect list.

In researching his book, Springmann tracked down and confronted Steinger about her time at Jeddah and her role in issuing these visas.

SPRINGMANN: So in the course of doing more research I ran across Jon Gold who was a 9/11 researcher and an activist, and he came up with Shayna Steinger's name. She was my successor several times removed who was in Jeddah and who would issued visas to 11 of the 15 Saudis who got the visas in Saudi Arabia to go fly airplanes into American buildings. I said "Wait a minute. What is this?"

And she went on—She was hired out of Columbia University with no real background in foreign affairs that I could see at a very high “GS” or foreign service level of about an FSO-4 which is maybe a GS-13 I can guess in the civil service. And she went on for a full 20 years with the State Department and retired, if she in fact worked for State. And after a bit I came across or actually a journalist came across me and said, “Look I found Shayna Steinger out in Iowa. Do you want to talk to her about your experience and her experience and compare them?”

So I did. I called her up. I found her phone number and she was living with her mother. And we had a bit of a fight to get her to talk to me, and I said, “Look, you either talk to me or I’ll write an article about it.” So she finally broke down and we talked, but only in general terms, saying, “Well, yes, I did the right thing. I did what I was told. They did an investigation. They cleared me.”

And I said “Well, what was the story? You know, my understanding was they were recruiting terrorists for the Mujahedin to come to the US for training at US military facilities, generally on the East Coast. And they even had recruiting offices in the United States, including one in Washington, DC, but I could never find any background exactly where they were located.”

And she said, “I didn’t do anything wrong. I just did what I was told.” And it was kind of like talking to my cats sometimes. They were there and they knew you were talking to them but they didn’t give you any real good answers. So the book went out. It’s never been challenged by the government, but it’s gotten me interviewed such as with you and with a lot of September 11th people.

Like so many of the 9/11 whistleblowers, Springmann paid a heavy price for his desire to tell the truth. His refusal to

bow to the CIA and issue visas to unqualified applicants during his time at Jeddah, his refusal to stop asking questions about the operation he had been involved in after he was transferred elsewhere, and his refusal to stop speaking about the visas for Al Qaeda long after he left the State Department have had drastic repercussions on his career and his personal life.

SPRINGMANN: Once I was out of state I found I couldn't get a job anywhere. I mean I spoke several languages to a greater or lesser extent, I had experience working on three continents, I knew how to manage offices. I couldn't get a job and I got the impression after a bit that I was being blacklisted.

So I hired one of these resume checking services over in California and asked them to ask around so they they called up Day Mount and pretended to be someone hiring me and wanted to know how I was as an employee in Jeddah, and what he thought of me and could he think of anything that special that I had done. And he said, "Well, I can't think of anything anything really right off the bat," and he came up with these weasel worded responses to their questions, which gave the impression that, no, you shouldn't hire this guy. But he didn't come out and say that, but it was by implication very very clear that Mike Springmann is not to be touched.

So then I went to law school and worked at getting a job after law school. I started asking around when I was in law school. I interned in various organizations like the American Civil Liberties Union. I talked to various national security organizations and found out that I couldn't get a job again to save my soul.

[. . .]

I tried writing I tried everything I could think of. And

while collecting unemployment I was told to issue them reports on how many people I talk to during the week, and I would send page after page after page in of companies I applied to that I had hoped would fit my talents and abilities but got nowhere.

So I figured, you know, the government is still in there, pitching, trying to keep me out of any kind of a gainful employment because that's how you get rid of people permanently. They don't have any money, they can take your house, you have no money to do anything except put food on the table, which you can. So it was a very nasty few years.

And for all of this sacrifice, we are still no closer to learning the truth about the Jeddah consulate and the CIA operations there than we were two decades ago. That 14 of the 19 alleged hijackers received their visas from the same office—12 from the same consular officer—is just the start of a deep and largely unexplored rabbit hole that brings not just the travel patterns or the intelligence connections but the very identity of those suspects into question.

Biographical details and pictures of [two separate Ziad Jarrahs](#) have been released to the public, and in fact multiple photographs of a number of the alleged hijackers appear to be pictures of entirely different people. A Waleed al-Shehri appeared [alive and well in Morocco](#) after 9/11 to protest the use of his name and photograph in stories about the supposed hijackers, and he was joined by an [Abdulrahman al-Omari in Jeddah](#), who [the FBI were forced to apologize to](#) for falsely naming as a suspect. [Newsweek reported](#) that five of the alleged hijackers received training at secure U.S. military installations in the 1990s. Amidst the confusion, FBI Director Robert Mueller was [forced to admit](#) that the Bureau was “not certain” as to the identity of several of the men on their suspect list.

These issues remain untouched and largely forgotten by a public that, through a process of suggestion and association, have come to believe largely without question that the 19 faces in the iconic “hijacker line up” are the perpetrators of 9/11. It is only through the story of people like Mike Springmann that we can begin removing those layers of lies and obfuscations from the story of 9/11, and come to a better understanding of the truth.

And, in the end, that idea—that we *can* get closer to the truth, that wrongs *can* be righted and lies exposed—is the idea that motivates whistleblowers like Mike Springmann. Whistleblowers who have come forward at great personal expense to shine light on these long-buried and inconvenient truths.

SPRINGMANN: I think, you know, I have to look at what I did and look at myself, and as the story goes look at your face in the mirror every morning. But I've been reading some emails sent to me by a good lawyer contact, lobbyist and attorney, on stoicism. And there have been things from Marcus Aurelius, Epictetus and other folks. And one of the things that I saw was their comment that—memento mori—that you expect to die and you don't fear death. You don't look forward to death, but at the end of the day you think “what have I done this day, the last day that might be the rest of my life? I may not wake up tomorrow morning. Have I balanced the accounts? Have I done something of substance? Have I tried to rectify a wrong and have I tried to do something good to balance out the evil in the world?”

[. . .]

So that's one of the reasons why I keep doing this. I figure if I've got nothing else to do for the rest of my life I've got to square the balance, and, regrettably, I've got to say educate the ignorant if I can.